

## **Two Holocaust Heroes Linked by Courage and Fate: Raoul Wallenberg and Peter Bergson**

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(Background Material from a Historian)

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Around the world this month, two anniversaries will be marked, connected to two men who both worked to save Jews during the Holocaust, and whose lives were linked in a way that they themselves did not realize.

On August 4, ceremonies were held in the United States, Israel, and elsewhere to mark the 91st birthday of Raoul Wallenberg, the Swedish businessman and diplomat who rescued Jews in Nazi-occupied Hungary in 1944.

Later in August, friends and family of Peter Bergson gathered at his graveside, in Israel, to mark the second anniversary of the death of the man whose political action campaigns in the United States played a crucial role in making Wallenberg's work possible.

Bergson --whose real name was Hillel Kook-- was a Zionist emissary from Jerusalem who spent the 1940s in the United States. When news of the Holocaust reached America in 1942-1943, Bergson established the Emergency Committee to Save the Jewish People of Europe, the only organization that openly criticized the Allies for refusing to save Jews from Hitler.

To alert the American public about the Holocaust, Bergson's committee sponsored more than two hundred full-page newspaper ads, many of

them authored by his close ally, the Academy Award-winning screenwriter Ben Hecht. The Bergson group also sponsored protest rallies, including a march of 400 rabbis to Capitol Hill and the White House to plead for rescue.

Employing what we today call "coalition politics," Bergson recruited an extraordinary variety of Americans who disagreed with each other on many issues but all agreed that the U.S. should help rescue Jews from the Nazi genocide.

Bergson's supporters included liberal as well as conservative intellectuals, Democratic as well as Republican politicians, and an array of colorful Hollywood celebrities whose support for rescue helped arouse public interest in the issue. Bergson's coalition also included prominent African-Americans such as Paul Robeson and Langston Hughes. In the autumn of 1943, Bergson persuaded prominent U.S. senators and representatives, from both parties, to introduce a resolution calling for the creation of a federal government agency to rescue Jewish refugees. The Roosevelt administration opposed devoting any resources to rescue and feared the rescue campaign would increase pressure to let refugees come to the U.S. But its effort to block the resolution floundered when the State Department's top immigration authority, Breckinridge Long, gave wildly misleading testimony at the hearings on the rescue resolution.

The embarrassing publicity from the hearings, combined with behind-the-scenes pressure from Treasury Secretary Henry Morgenthau, Jr. and his aides, convinced President Roosevelt to establish the agency the resolution had demanded--the War Refugee Board.

Here is where the lives of Bergson and Wallenberg intersected. One of the War Refugee Board's first areas of focus was Hungary, which the Germans occupied in March 1944. As Adolf Eichmann's mass deportations of Hungarian Jews to Auschwitz began, the WRB's agent in Stockholm recruited Wallenberg for rescue work. With funds and

other assistance provided by the WRB, Wallenberg traveled to Budapest, where he was appointed first secretary of the Swedish diplomatic mission in order to shield him from arrest.

In the months to follow, the courageous and resourceful Wallenberg designed a Swedish protective passport and distributed thousands of them to Jews in Budapest, to prevent the Germans from deporting them. He used bribery, threats, and blackmail to interfere with the deportations. In one instance, he leaped atop a departing train and frantically handed protective documents to the Jews inside as German bullets whizzed around him.

Historians estimate that Wallenberg's efforts saved some 100,000 lives-including those of future U.S. Congressman Tom Lantos and his wife Annette.

(Altogether, the War Refugee Board's work directly or indirectly saved approximately 220,000 people, including those rescued by Wallenberg.)

In a tragic twist of fate, Wallenberg was arrested by the Soviets when they occupied Budapest in January 1945, and was never heard from again. It is generally assumed that he died in a Soviet prison, although that has never been definitively proven.

In recent years, the name Wallenberg has become virtually a household word.

The television miniseries "Wallenberg" was viewed by millions. Countless books and articles have been written about him. A tree on the "Avenue of the Righteous" at Yad VaShem (Israel's official Holocaust memorial institution) bears his name. A monument to him was erected in Budapest. He was even made an honorary U.S. citizen (the only other person to have been so honored was Winston Churchill).

The one thing Wallenberg does not have is a grave where those whom he saved can gather to honor his memory. Peter Bergson's good deeds have not received appropriate recognition, but his courage and

achievements will be remembered when his family and friends gather at his graveside in Israel later this month.

And they will surely say a prayer for Raoul Wallenberg as well. For although Wallenberg and Bergson never met and probably did not even know of each other's work, their lives were inextricably linked by their desperate campaigns, thousands of miles apart, to rescue Jews from annihilation. genocides around the world).